

colonial history. Baay succeeded in describing the unequal nature of the relationship between a *nyai* and her master. *Nyai* were viewed in two different ways; negatively (they were lazy, lustful, and stupid) but at the same time, they had positive characters (loyal, hardworking).

Baay spared himself no effort and he used documents, life stories, letters, and literary citations. The book is a revelation for everybody, also for Indonesians. Fortunately, Komunitas Bambu has published an Indonesian translation of this book in June 2010, entitled *Nyai dan pergundikan di Hindia-Belanda*. Everybody may be descended from a *nyai*, because a *nyai* is not only the ancestors of the Indies people in the Netherlands. Maya Sutedja Liem mentioned that the *nyai* is the mother of all peoples. I agree with her: maybe we all have nephews or cousins in the Netherlands or in other countries (Australia, Canada, America, or New Zealand) where Indies peoples have emigrated after they left Indonesia. This book is highly recommended: it is worth reading.

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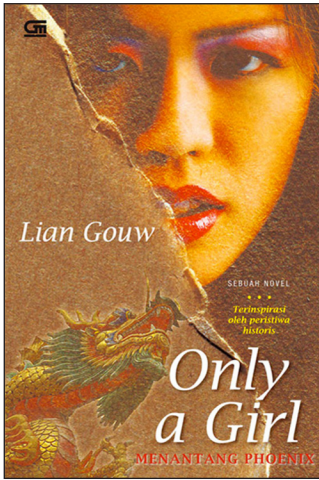
Lian Gouw, *Only a girl; Menantang phoenix*. Translated by Royani Ping. Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2010, viii + 385pp. ISBN 9789-979-22-6233-9. Price: IDR 65,000 (soft cover).

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Readers have no problems in believing that producing non-fiction works such as essays, academic papers, investigative journalistic pieces and opinion articles, requires a great deal of research, thinking and analysis, yet many seem to think that writing fiction is easier, "because all the writer needs to

do is tell a story”.



Nothing is further from the truth. Writing fiction involves a huge amount of, and sustained, introspection, as well as a continuous dialogue with oneself. In presenting a picture, the writer needs to be totally honest with her/himself, that s/he is painting a picture exactly as how s/he perceives it, regardless of how unsavory, or even how improbably good it is. The moment the writer tries to distort it for any reasons, the story will lose its natural magic - the magic which has the power to prevent the reader from putting the book down. This magic, is unmistakably present throughout Lian Gouw's novel, *Only a girl; menantang phoenix*.

The story spans over approximately twenty years, from the early 1930s until the first years of the 1950s in Indonesia's history. However, since it covers three generations of a particular family, reading it gives the impression of watching the *dérroulement* of a longer tale. The plot is certainly not linear and lateral. It has bubbles and troughs along the line, which broaden, and add depths to, the setting and make the whole story more palpable.

The main characters, with all their human strengths and foibles, draw the reader's sympathy and invoke anger, pity, bewilderment, frustration and contempt, at different times. And just as importantly, these individuals are mirrors of the society at the time, each reflecting different angles and scenes which together present a very believable and touching story.

Through the one extended family alone the reader sees how in different individuals, personality in its interplay with history and politically constructed social hierarchy, moulds very different perceptions of self-worth, and forge wildly dissimilar future ambitions. In these characters the reader learns of varied aspects of life in the then Dutch East Indies' West Java, especially those related to the region's Chinese community.

The main protagonist of the novel is Dutch educated Carolien Ong, whose reasonably well-off Chinese family live in Bandung of the 1930s, enjoying the privileges granted by the colonial government as a reward for services rendered by her late father. Through Dutch education, - part and parcel of the family's privileges -, an idea of the world germinates and grows in her mind, which powers her ambition to achieve a dream where living in the Netherlands is the ultimate goal. To Carolien, everything Dutch is to strive for, and all aspects related to indigenous cultures, being inferior, to be dismissed. She is however, powerless in the face of her mother and her two elder brothers who still adhere to Chinese traditions, where decisions taken by the sons of the family, hold sway. Unconsciously she looks to Dutch influence, to break with what she perceived as unfair traditions.

A counterpoint character to Carolien is her husband Po Han, from whom

she later obtains a divorce after a relatively brief and unhappy union. Unlike his wife, Po Han is not mesmerized by aspects of Dutch culture, and he does not share Carolien's ambition to be part of the Netherlands' world. He, for his part, is not convinced that their daughter, Jenny, must at all cost, be imbued in Dutch culture in order to later go to the Netherlands to study. Ironically it is he, thanks to his skills in photography, who, after the divorce, goes to study and work in the country his former wife can only visit in her dreams.

Carolien and Po Han's incompatibility is further complicated by Po Han's grandmother, Ocho, who brought him up, and always wanted him to marry a younger version of herself – a woman whose sole purpose in life is to look after Po Han's needs. Ocho's continuous interference in the young couple's life proves destructive; its effects on Carolien and Po Han, though different, are equally detrimental. Yet Ocho is not depicted as an altogether bad character, but a woman desperate to assure a semblance of security for her current and later years. She is a product, or even a victim, of her own circumstances, which do not dovetail with the couple's ideas of family life, however disparate they inherently are.

The tension between Carolien and Po Han opens windows to side bubbles off the main storyline. These are in effect further illustrations of the various social and political drives of the time, which push and sometimes pulverise the lives of the characters, individually and collectively.

Another character just as important in her own worth is Carolien's mother, Nanna, who maintains her feet firmly on the ground, and not prone to mesmerization of any sort. She is at first glance an unassuming person who does not throw her weight around by eyeballing those in her family who dare contradict her. She is nonetheless as strong as a banyan tree, without having to effect any of the above. And most importantly, the character of Nanna is very believable.

The political situations during the last decades of Dutch colonization and the brief period of Japanese occupation also play an important role in shaping everyone's life in this very engaging story. Carolien's elder brother Chip, is killed by the Japanese for his attempts to help some Dutch political prisoners, leaving his two already motherless children, complete orphans. Thanks to their family's closeness, they are able to recede into the folds of Nanna's households, where they have been living in any case.

Dutch colonization on the archipelago placed the Chinese separate from the indigenous population. Some of the Chinese, who had enjoyed Dutch education, fancied that they were more accepted as friends by their colonial masters than their indigenous counterparts were. There were consequently hardly real friendships between themselves and the indigenous people. However, this does not mean that there were no human connections between these two groups. The implicit, two-way sense of loyalty between the Ong family and their domestic staff would only elude those who deliberately ignore it.

If, assuming from the title, the author's intended leitmotif is the

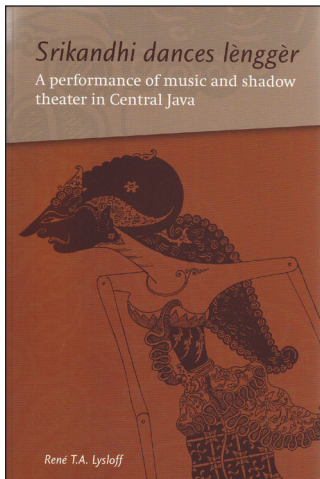
disadvantaged position of women in the traditional Chinese society, she succeeded in painting that as well as creating a novel which is compelling, and with the power to touch the reader's emotion.

One of the most touching parts of the book is when Carolien, after experiencing a number of frustrations and hard-knocks in life, in her late thirties, finds happiness in looking after a foundling, a three-month old baby girl. However she only has a year of maternal bliss. When the baby's biological family is found, Carolien knows that she cannot keep her. The scenes of separation are the most heart-wrenching moments at least this reviewer has had to endure. In fact, this chapter is made even more significant by the sad utterance Carolien gives at the discovery of the baby's sex, that she understands why it was abandoned, 'you are only a girl' (p.182). This utterance I think, gave the book the title.

Credit is also due to the successful translation of the book from English. It retains the magic of a fiction work and all at once, has increased the scope of its readership.

It is a book not to be missed.

René T.A. Lysloff, *Srikandhi dances lènggèr; A performanca of music and shadow theater in Central Java*. Leiden: KITLV Press, 2009, viii + 571 pp. [Verhandelingen 248.] ISBN 978-90-6718-298-0. Price: EUR 39,50 (soft cover).



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Lysloff discusses in his book one performance of the shadow-puppet theater (*wayang*) story (*lakon*) *Srikandhi Mbarang Lènggèr* (translated by him as "Srikandhi dances Lènggèr") as performed in Banyumas. Banyumas is a city which lies on the administrative borders of West and Central Java, and in the cultural fringe of the Central Javanese cultural sphere to the east, and the lands of the

Sundanese to the west. The area has long been considered to be culturally peripheral vis-à-vis its eastern neighbours, the refined and cultured Javanese of the Central Javanese principalities.

The book is based on extensive fieldwork, and presents a commercial recording of a studio performance *dhalang* (puppeteer) Sugino and his